

By Piali Banerjee

HER attention wanders while answering your questions. She refuses to relate past incidents in any chronological order. Sometimes she even refuses to relate past incidents in any coherent order, preferring to horse around with extensive mimicry and jokes instead. It's only when her son admonishes her ("Mummai, please, no masi"), that she takes your questions seriously—for a while.

Shobha Gurtu is 77 years old, and the only time she is deadly serious during the entire interview is when she breaks into her favourite songs. Then she becomes oblivious to everyone around and retreats into a haven

ROOTS SHOBHA GURTU

of her own, one where there are no disturbances (and certainly, no interviewers).

For the free spirit that she is today, she seems to have grown up in a traditionally restrictive atmosphere, supervised by her maternal grandmother, Krishnabai. "My grandmother was very conservative. She didn't want me to go to school," she recalls. "When I went to school—the nearest municipal school round the corner—she would be at the window waiting for me for the most part of the day. Finally she insisted that I leave school and join the private classes opposite our house, so that she could keep an eye on me from the window. Of course, her pet rhetoric always

'Music stands for freedom'



SINGING THE SAME TUNE: Shobha Gurtu photographed in 1965 (L) and now

remained that I should learn to cook and wait for marriage, instead of going to school."

Yet it was her grandmother whom she called 'aii' (mother) and whose love she remembers as the most selfless. "You don't get that quality of love today," she murmurs, even at the risk of her present family hearing her.

When did music come into her life? "I was born into it since my mother, Menakabai Shirodkar,

was an accomplished classical singer and dancer," she replies. "She was always with her music when she was at home, and sometimes I would creep into her room and listen to her sing for hours. Of course, my grandmother didn't approve and would hustle me out whenever she caught me at it, but I guess I did manage to pick up a lot early on. Later, I would sing the songs that I had learnt to my make-believe audience of flowers

in our garden at our house in Belgum. I learnt to differentiate between evening ragas and morning ragas even back then, and sung them accordingly, to my flowers."

Her formal training in music was delayed, simply because her grandmother didn't think that music was a very good option for a young girl in those days. "Musicians are given a lot of respect today. But decades ago, they weren't. So I wasn't allowed

to sing," she says.

It was only after her marriage that opportunity presented itself to her, in the form of her father-in-law, Narayan Nath Gurtu. A musician himself, apart from being a patron of classical music, he asked her to sing one day. "I was embarrassed because he pushed the tanpura towards me, and I didn't even know how to tune a tanpura then," she smiles. "So he taught me, looking amused. But when I started singing, he became more serious and declared that I should be trained in music. I was still apprehensive of doing what my grandmother had forbidden me to do,

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so he went to talk to her and get her permission on my behalf."

Permission was, of course, duly granted ("How could she refuse my father-in-law?") and Gurtu began her training under Ustad Ghamman Khan. Music became an inherent part of her life at her in-laws' place in Dharwar. "Musicians like Bhimsen Joshi, Gangubai Hangal, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Mallikarjun Mansoor and many more would visit us on their way to concerts at Bangalore. And then there would be music all night," she says. "I think young-

sters call it 'jam session' today. We would sing through the night, sometimes taking each other on in the form of jugalbandis, even while the kitchen served hiriyani and other food till the early hours of the morning. Today such mehfls are passe, I guess because there are no patrons of classical music any more."

Today there is riaz to take the place of such prolonged spells of practice. "I sang in mehfls, but I don't remember doing too much riaz," she says. "My guru used to say that too much riaz would spoil my voice. Besides, I've always been happy-go-lucky, more than a hard worker. So I just concentrated on enjoying my music."

Today there are professional concerts too, unlike then. "We never had appointment diaries or concert fees," she laughs. "If anyone gave me Rs 50 at a mehfl, I would be happy."

The music that she enjoys most is one that is suited to her free spirit. "I like Sufiana music, music for the moment," she says. "For I believe music is something that should make you feel good immediately—without any thought of what critics will say later."

And it is for this love of freedom that Gurtu has always resisted the traditional gurukul system. She herself never opted to stay with her guru, nor did she ever offer the option to her students, later on. Her reasoning is simple: "I don't like *bandhan*, I don't like being tied down. After all, music stands for freedom, doesn't it?"

(This is part of a series that traces the roots of well-known personalities)